



# News Release

## PRESS OFFICE

---

**Release Date:** March 28, 2006

**Release Number:** 06-11

**Contact:** Melende Ward, (559) 487-5791

**Internet Address:** <http://www.sba.gov/news>

## Disabled Vet Becomes SBA's First California Small Business Person of the Year

---

*Former Navy SEAL Turns Around a Central California Water Bottling Company*



Pictured: John E. Wheeler

**SALINAS, CA --** John E. Wheeler spent almost 20 years around water while serving as a U.S. Navy SEAL. Now he sells the stuff. His perseverance as a disabled veteran and a novice new business owner who grew and expanded a small bottled water company in Monterey County has made him the U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA) 2006 California Small Business Person of the Year. Wheeler is the owner and president of Peninsula Pure Water, Inc., in Salinas.

Wheeler will join winners from the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and Guam in mid-April to mark the annual celebration of National Small Business Week. One of them will be selected as National Small Business Person of the Year. The announcement will take place at SBA's National Small Business Week program set for April

13-14, 2006, in Washington, D.C.

When the original owner expressed an interest in selling the company, Wheeler, who had no prior knowledge of the bottled water business, studied the industry and the bottling process. His analysis concluded that with hard work and dedication, the business would have great potential for growth. With the help of a \$190,000 SBA guaranteed loan through Monterey County Bank, Wheeler purchased Peninsula Pure Water in 1998. At the time, Peninsula Pure Water had 50 customer accounts and 70 daily water bottle deliveries, mainly agricultural businesses in the Salinas area.

Wheeler focused on expanding delivery routes to Monterey about 18 miles away. A year later, he purchased a bottled water company in King City, then expanded into the adjoining Counties of San Benito and Santa Cruz. From a customer list of 155 with a daily delivery of fewer than 100 bottles, Wheeler has grown the firm to an expediential number of 24,000 customers and is now delivering about 1,100 bottles of water a day. During the same period, net income has climbed from \$5,000 to \$275,000, a 5,465 percent increase. Sales continue to increase over 1,000 percent from the original gross numbers.

Wheeler personally trains all hires and offers to pay half their tuition costs if they attend college. Even when there are slow periods and staff may have their hours cut back, he continues to pay them full-time wages. Wheeler injured his spinal column while serving as a Navy SEAL. After 19 years of service with tours in Europe, the Middle East and in Panama and Grenada, he left the Navy as a disabled veteran. Though there are days when he's in excruciating pain, he rarely takes a day off and is usually at work at 6 a.m. and rarely leaves the office before 6 p.m.

Each year since 1963, the President has issued a proclamation calling for the celebration of Small Business Week. National Small Business Week recognizes outstanding small business owners for their personal achievements and contributions to the nation's economy. This year, the celebration will honor an estimated 25 million small business owners in America. Small businesses represent more than 99 percent of all employers, provide 75 percent of the net new jobs and generate a majority of American innovations.